DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 263 CG 023 416

AUTHOR Davis, Robert E.; And Others
TITLE Empowerment for the Nineties.
PUB DATE 20 Nov 90
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Tennessee Association for Counseling and Development (Memphis, TN, November 18-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Assertiveness; *Counseling Techniques; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Individual Development; *Individual Power; Personal Autonomy
IDENTIFIERS *Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Power is the capacity of an individual to self-determine his or her life and to participate in the creation of an appropriate environment for that life. The exercise of personal power is necessary to develop one's unique potential, and it is necessary if society is to benefit from contributions and participation of all its members. In an effort to explore views of adults on power, two groups of students enrolled in a graduate course (N=48) were asked to discuss what they thought of power and powerlessness and what remedies they saw to powerlessness. Most respondents had a tendency to hold negative associations with power and with powerlessness. Students then selected from the list of remedies three courses of action to overcome powerlessness. Items chosen by both groups appeared to favor personal exploration of the self and self-initiated action. No one selected a remedy in which external determination of behavior was sought. (The document concludes with a list of activities suggested as possible discussion topics for empowerment. Examples are included in the areas of readiness for development of power, understanding and acceptance of self, identifying motives and goals, understanding expectations, and development of skills.) (NB)

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Empowerment for the Nineties

Robert E. Davis

Robert E. Hughes, Jr.

Department of Counseling and Personnel Services

Memphis State University

Sam Shaw

Memphis City Schools

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Paper presented to Tennessee Association for Counseling and Development annual convention, Memphis, TN, November 20, 1990

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Empowerment for the Nineties

Power is the capacity of an individual to self-determine his/her life and to participate in the creation of an appropriate environment for that life. The exercise of personal power is necessary to develop one's unique potential, and it is necessary if society is to benefit from contributions and participation of all its members.

Many have not developed the competencies required for self-determination and have remained disempowered. They may develop power through individual risk and initiative. They may be helped in this process by counselors, teachers, trainers, and others who assist them by creating appropriate climate, facilitating their exporation and learning, modeling, and utilizing intrinsic rewards. It is important that helpers understand empowering methodology and the kinds of power which are constructive rather than destructive.

Persons may use constructive or destructive power if they see it required for self-determination. Malcolm S. Knowles and Associates (1985) and Edward L. Deci (1980) agree that internal frames of reference and intrinsic motivation are necessary orientations for self-determination. Supportive leaders assist in the process by respecting intrinsic motivation and by promoting constructive kinds of power. May (1972) identifies nutrient power (power for others), integrative power (power with others) and sometimes competitive power (power against others) as being positive. Deci identified five aspects which need strengthening if individuals are to be competent and self-determined: awareness of their motives and emotions, acceptance of all parts of themselves as positive or neutral (while distinguishing feelings from behavior), increasing the ability to make choices from among motives and goals, understanding expectations in terms of the relationship between behavior and satisfaction of motives, and learning skills of accommodation in order to change that which can be changed and accommodating to that which can't.

Block (1987), Deci (1980), and Malcolm S. Knowles and Associates (1985) agree that environments which control others restrict the full development of individuals and that supportive environments foster individual development. Rogers (1969) was among the first

of many to use the term "facilitator" to describe the person who assist others to develop their own personal resources. The facilitator (p. 164-166) helps to create a learning experience based on trust, elicits and clarifies individual purposes, relies on the desires of individuals to lead to implementation of purposes which have meaning for them, makes available a wide variety of resources, serves personally as a flexible resource, accepts the intellectual content and the emotionalized attitudes of individuals, becomes a participant learner, shares without imposing, responds to expressions of deep or strong feelings of others, and recognizes and accepts his/her own limitations.

Natiello (1990) finds traditional power exploitative and destructive. She proposes that facilitators use collaborate power, characterized by openness, responsiveness, dignity, personal empowerment, alternating influence, and cooperation rather than competition.

In an effort by the authors to explore views of adults on power, two groups of students enrolled in graduate courses (27 persons in group 1, 21 persons in group 2) were asked to brainstorm and discuss three questions: When you think of power, what words or phrases come to mind? When you think of powerlessness, what words or phrases come to mind? What action might you take to remedy a state of powerlessness? In discussing their brainstormed list, each group agreed by consensus that the group members had a tendency to have negative associations with power and with powerlessness.

Each participant was asked to select from the list of remedies three courses of action he/she would choose to overcome powerlessness. In group one, the items selected by four or more persons from a list of 51 items were the following: education (10), improve self-image (7), confrontation (6), pray (6), assert self (5), create coalition (5), self-determination (5), and counseling (4). Group two chose from 36 items: assertiveness (7), prayer (7), find inner strength (6), raise self-esteem (5), education (5), examine beliefs in relationship to powerlessness (5), and set goals (5). Items selected by both groups appear to favor personal exploration of self (assert self, self-determination, prayer, find inner strength, and examine beliefs in relationship to powerlessness) and self-initiated action

(confrontation, assert self, create coalition, assertiveness, raise self-esteem, and set goals). If education and counseling are seen as opportunities to explore and learn competencies, the findings are consistent with Deci's aspects which need strengthening. No one selected a remedy in which external determination of behavior was sought.

The following activities are suggested as possible discussion topics for empowerment, either through structured activities or through facilitative interaction as the topics arise spontaneously. with the leader using a facilitative orientation in order to assist others in developing their power. Many of the topics are related to Deci's listing. Examples are given. They are likely to call for continuing development as well as exploration.

I. Readiness for development of power

A. Do you choose safety, caution, and control in your life? dependency choices.(Block)

B. Do you choose positive politics (good for others), personal responsibility, and risk-taking(autonomy choices)? (Block)

C. In what ways do you feel empowered?

D. In what ways do you feel powerless?

II. Understanding and acceptance of self

A. What are your motives? (Deci) In school? In life? Other?

B. What are your feelings in situation X? What do you do with them?

C. In what ways do you accept yourself? Not accept yourself?

III. Identifying motives and goals

A. What are your goals in life? In area X?

B. What were your behaviors in situation X and what motives did these behaviors fulfill?

C. What motives and goals do you express openly to others? Explore.

D. What motives and goals do you carry out by hidden agenda? Explore.

IV. Understanding expectations

A. What are your expectations of others? Particular others?

B. What do others expect of you? Particular others?

C. Do you communicate your expectations of others? How?

D. Do you comunicate your understanding of others' expectations of you? How?

V. Development of skills

A. What skills in relationship do you want to develop? What constructive skills? Assertiveness?

Confrontation? Developing networks and coalitions? Collaboration? Mutual influence? Negotiation?

B. What areas of your self do you want to develop? Self-esteem? Self-understanding?

Understanding of goals and motives? Developing inner strength? Developing spiritual strength? Understanding your intrinsic motivation?

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